

## WHAT DOES GOD SEE?

→ I wonder if you, like me, have ever looked in the mirror and been frightened to see your mother or your father looking back at you? Or perhaps you've wondered why you had to start losing your hair so young? Do you wish you had a better complexion, or blue eyes, or a smaller nose or longer legs or slimmer arms or ....? Now, you can keep your responses to those questions to yourselves, but if you can honestly say that you have never wished that something about yourself was a little different then you are definitely in the minority, because most of us at one time or another have undoubtedly wished that we looked different than we do even if only for a moment. For example, when I'm in a crowd, I'm always wishing that I was just a few inches taller!

.....In this modern world, there is a good deal of emphasis on the importance of our appearance. We regularly hear about film stars and pop stars that are having something nipped or tucked or undergoing some other procedure in order to make themselves look younger and more beautiful. Our TV screens and magazines are full of advertisements for miracle diets and plastic surgery, exercise regimes and fat free foods. Many people spend many hours and many pounds striving and straining to improve and retain their physical appearance. But why? After all "beauty is only skin deep" isn't it?

.....And beauty is also meant to be "in the eye of the beholder!" But if that really is true then what counts as beautiful and what doesn't? If we look back through our history, and particularly at some works of art, then we'll soon discover that up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century most of the world thought that the most beautiful women were those who had plenty of meat on their bone, in fact, quite the opposite from the size 0 models that many people try to emulate today. It has really only been in very recent generations that our western world has placed so much emphasis on being thin. Perhaps a few more of us would be satisfied with how we look if we'd lived in a bygone era or indeed if things hadn't changed?

.....And of course we all know that around the world and indeed in our own country, within different countries, regions and generations what is considered attractive is wide ranging. The piercings which so many people obtain today are misunderstood or even considered abhorrent by others and the neck rings worn by the women of some African tribes to lengthen their necks actually cause deformity, all in the name of beauty, at least in the eyes of those within that tribe.

→ So, if there is no truly definitive understanding of beauty, then why do so many people get so worked up about it? None at all it seems if the story we have heard this evening is anything to go by! Saul had been King of Israel. He had been without equal in that nation. He stood head and shoulders above everyone else and he succeeded in everything he did but eventually he became so arrogant and so disobedient that the Lord rejects him as King of Israel and sends Samuel to Bethlehem to find and to anoint a new King for the nation of Israel.

.....As you read this story, you can almost sense the panic that Samuel is feeling. He is worried that Saul will find out about his trip, so the sacrifice to be offered whilst there in Bethlehem is something of a cunning cover story. Of course, when Jesse and his sons gathered to offer the sacrifice that Samuel had brought, Samuel began to cast his eye over the sons that Jesse presented to him. One by one the sons were paraded before him and Samuel saw tall, strong, handsome young men, all of which seemed highly suitable for the position, but every time God was saying to Samuel, "No, this isn't the one." It's understandable perhaps that Samuel should have been thinking this way, because when

Saul had been anointed King he had been physically impressive but this time things were apparently going to be very different. God said to Samuel, "I do not judge as man judges. Man looks at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart."

.....How wonderful that God looks beyond the nose that we think is too long or the feet that are too big. He sees beyond the ears that we think stick out too much or the ankles that are too thick. He looks beyond whether you are too tall or too short, too heavy or too thin. He is more worried about what is inside our hearts than anything else at all.

→ When Jesse had finally presented seven of his sons to Samuel and all of them, one by one, had been rejected by God, Samuel asks, "are there any more?" The youngest one had seemingly been dismissed from the process by Jesse; presumably he had been considered to be too young and too insignificant to even be worth showing to the holy man. But when he is called in from the fields where he is working, amazingly he is acknowledged as the one who is to be and he is anointed by Samuel.

.....God didn't consider him to be too young or too insignificant. God could see the potential in him to lead the nation at a time when it was in a very dangerous political situation with the threat of the Philistines hanging over them. But, there is a certain irony here. Although David is not chosen for his stature, or for his physical strength or for his good looks, the Bible does describe him as a healthy, handsome young man, and as the story of David unfolds, it's actually those good looks that are his downfall later in life.

→ "Man looks at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart." God sees things very differently to us. He is chiefly concerned with what is going on inside of us and although we might not be all that we could be just yet, God can see the potential that there is within us to become the people that he knows we can be, the people that he made us to be, the people through whom he can fulfil his purposes.

.....So, what is God looking for when he looks into our heart? First of all he is looking for a heart that will reflect his love. As we read God's word we find stories of people like Zaccheus who was vertically challenged, like the woman who had been bleeding for many years and who had been rejected by all around her and like Jeremiah who thought he was too young to be of any use. All of these responded positively to God and had their lives and hearts changed because of that response. It doesn't make any difference to God what age you are, or what physical state you are in. He looks at us and sees his beautiful creation and longs to find inside us a heart that is ready to receive his love and then reflect that love to others.

→ Secondly, God is looking for a heart that is pure. The world in which we live today is not an easy one in which to remain pure. There are subtle ways in which our hearts and minds are subjected to impure images and thoughts. Much of the material that appears on our television and cinema screens or which is printed in our magazines or found on the Internet is certainly not conducive to keeping pure hearts and pure thoughts. "Create in me a pure heart" the psalmist wrote. That's what God wants to find in each one of us. Not flawless skin, or perfect posture, but a pure heart.

→ And thirdly, when God looks at our hearts he is looking for commitment. We may have hearts that, in the main, are loving and we may well be working hard at keeping ourselves pure. But sometimes in our efforts to keep ourselves pure, our commitment flags. We avoid those people and situations that might tarnish our purity so we become

content to simply sit in the church pew and not exercise our faith amongst others. We are content not to have to roll our sleeves up or get our hands dirty.

.....When David Livingstone was about his missionary work, a missionary society wrote to him and asked, "Have you found a good road to where you are?" If so, we want to know how to send other people to join you?" David Livingstone's response to that was to say, "If you have people who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want people who will come if there is no road at all." That's the level of commitment that God looks for in our hearts. A commitment that gets us out of our comfortable place and into the world that needs to hear about what God in Christ has done for us.

→ All of us here, every single one of us, have the potential to have hearts that are loving, pure and committed. When God looks at us he knows what we can achieve and what we can be with the help of his transforming spirit. In Jesus Christ we see all that a human being can be and it's because of Jesus that we can be changed.

.....It's very easy perhaps for us to be despondent about the human race because we look at others through human eyes and we view them critically, often only seeing the bad things that come to the fore. As well as remembering that God looks at the heart and not the outside appearance, this story reminds us of the need for us to look at others and at the world with God's eyes. All of us are beautiful in God's sight. That's the way he has made us. So, we need to look beyond what is obviously before our eyes, and ask God to help us see the potential in people and situations.

.....How many of you remember the television series called "The Choir" that was on quite a few years ago now. There have been several spin off programmes that have come about as a result of it since as well. But, if you watched it you will know that a young music and singing teacher went into a secondary school in Leicester in which the emphasis was very much on sport and eventually he managed to get them singing. He changed lads who thought that singing was only for wimps, into fully-fledged members of a 100 strong choir that performed admirably at the Albert Hall. Gareth Malone knew that inside of those young men that many would have written off academically and creatively, there was the potential to make beautiful music. His commitment and enthusiasm not only got those lads singing but, in many cases, by their own admission, transformed their lives.

.....As a church we may well be surprised sometimes at the folk God brings amongst us, and surprised by those that end up in positions of leadership, and surprised about what God is asking of us. But that's because he sees things very differently to the way we see things. May we be continually asking God to give us hearts that are loving, pure and committed and eyes that are not blinded to the truth, or to the opportunities in a situation or to the potential in a person.

.....May we have eyes to see what God sees and hearts that are ready to respond when he calls. May we always believe that we are loved by God and beautiful in his sight.